The Legacy of the Crocodile: Critical Debates over Taiwanese Lesbian Fiction

Since the early 1990s Taiwan has witnessed a remarkable explosion of queer cultural production. A spate of gay, lesbian, and transgender-themed films was released, spanning a range of styles from popular to art-house and independent documentary, by directors including Ang Lee, Tsai Ming-liang, Mickey Chen, and Li Xiangru. Critics have praised them for their ability to construct normative sexuality and gender, by artists including Tang-li Hung, Meihua Lai, and Chun-ming Hou.

By Fran Martin

G ay and lesbian themes emerged in popular music – in veil formed in mainstream pop, but loud and proud in underground queer music cultures; and the decade saw the rise to fame of a new generation of young queer authors, including Chi Ta-wei, Lucifer Hung, Chen Xue, and Qiu Miaojin (Chiu Miaochin), while a slightly older generation of writers also garnered prestigious literary prizes for gay- and lesbian-themed fiction (Martin, Angelhög). Northern Taiwan’s media, from daily newspapers to talk-back radio and local free-to-air and cable television, has also been influenced by the likes of Miaojin, Qiu, and the queer movements in Thailand.

Despite this apparent momentous proliferation of queer cultural production, it must be noted that the audience for much of the new tongshi culture remains limited. In the case of avant-garde queer fiction, film, and graphic arts, the audience is largely restricted to the educated, urban middle class. The fact that such stories, films, and artworks enjoyed prominence in the intellectual circles of northern Taiwan does not translate into any wide-spread acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals, and much of the media buzz around tongshi culture remains markedly homophobic. Nonetheless, queer cultural production of the 1990s proved to be an interesting example of the rapid and complex transformations in Asian sexual cultures in the era of global capitalism.

An interesting feature of Taiwan’s emergent queer culture can be described as the demarcation of a particular subculture, characterized by disjuncture and by the disconcertingly simultaneous availability of multiple, often inconcommen- surable ways of thinking about sexuality (Martin, Situating Sexualities). For example, while ‘queer’ emerged in 1990s Euro-American contexts as a critique of pre-existing lesbian and gay cultures and identity politics, kūr – a transvaluation of queer – first appeared in northern Taiwan’s intellectual circles in 1994, just two years after the local appropriation of the term tongshi. We are here in the near-simultaneous emergence and interesting cohab-

The simultaneous growth of the large, visible communities of kathoey, gay, and lesbians defined that of anti-homosexual discourses makes defini- tive statements concerning the ‘Thai attitude’ towards homosexuality diffi- cult. Local gay and lesbian activists argue that these state actions are evi- dence of an enduring sexual conser- vatism, and anti-homosexual attitudes that their author was unacquainted with. It is known that they were being manipulated by the influential professor, awkwardly attempted to follow their instructions without understanding another conflict by per- forming a punitive inspection of the film, amidst jeers from the audi- ence, and then quickly leaving after deering the men. After a brief visit by police officers on the opening night, the festival continued uninterrupted. These often-contradic- tory efforts by agents of the state to repress homosexuality have become largely symbolic gestures rather than sus- tained campaigns of persecution.

Notes

1 ‘Butch’ and ‘femme’ refer to masculine and feminine women respectively, in lesbian relationships that emphasize gender role-playing.

References

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Taiwanese Literary Studies

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Qiu’s narrators are portrayed as subcultural lesbian icons; censured as repressive, anti-feminist masculinists; and recuperated as representatives of a queer and subversive form of lesbian gender – all at almost exactly the same moment. In one sense this suggests the simulta- neous co-presence of forms of feminist and queer thought, which, in their Euro-American instances, emerged over a far more protracted time period. Yet this need not imply a kind of ‘time lag’ model in which the current debates in Taiwan merely reproduce the ‘sex wars’ in Euro-American feminism and lesbian and gay studies that began in the 1970s. In the distinct cultural and his- torical context of contemporary Taiwan, the debates over feminism and lesbian gender that Qiu’s writing catalyses undeniably take on local and hybrid forms that cannot be predicted in any straightforward way by reference to the globalization of intellectual currents on which they draw. My point here is not to adjudicate between the competing claims of national and global intelligences. It is rather that nothing else, the complexity of these debates implies that Qiu’s writing will certainly be a richly productive object of study. Rather, I take Qiu’s critical reception as a par- ticular instance of the general phenomenon of what I have called the temporality of disruptive simultaneity in Tai- wan’s queer cultures – and to venture the suggestion that this temporality may also structure how social, cultural, and intellectual movements (including feminist and queer ones, but also others) travel transnationally to take unpredictable local effect in the era of cultural globalization more broadly.

Notes

* ‘Butch’ and ‘femme’ refer to masculine and feminine women respectively, in lesbian relationships that emphasize gender role-playing.
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